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SUBJECT: CANVASSING BAMAKO VOTERS: T-SHIRTS, CASH AND COLD STORAGE

REF: BAMAKO 01379

¶1. Summary: The Embassy called on fish vendors in the heart of Bamako's largest market to measure grassroots support for newly proclaimed presidential contender Soumeylou Boubey Maiga. Echoing the sentiments of local fruit sellers (reftel), fish vendors regard Maiga as an attractive presidential candidate. Medina market vendors said Boubey Maiga was the only candidate genuinely interested in the plight of those earning no more than a few cents a day in profit. In a presidential campaign where the two main contenders - ATT and National Assembly president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita - are generally portrayed as too imperial to mix with the working poor, there may be room for a dark-horse candidate willing to rub elbows with the masses. End Summary.

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Fish, and Votes, on Ice  
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¶2. Salimata Coulibaly and her 100 member Medina Market Fish Vendors Association feel their situation has become more precarious during President Amadou Toumani Toure's (ATT) five year presidency. Between truck rentals to bring fish from the coast, ice, bribes, and fees for sales space, margins remain razor thin, despite a sales price per kilo that is double her acquisition cost.

¶3. As president of the largest fish vendors association in Mali, Coulibaly hoped ATT's election in 2002 would relieve some of the economic pressures weighing on her and her fellow vendors. "We supported ATT long before he became president," said Coulibaly. During the 2002 campaign, ATT and First Lady Toure Lobbo Traore invited Coulibaly to their residence to court her and the market women she represents. Coulibaly said she left ATT's residence with 100 ATT-For-President T-shirts, the CFA equivalent of USD 200 in cash, promises to renovate the Medina market and ATT's personal telephone number. Coulibaly never heard from ATT again. "Nothing happened after the election," she complained. "ATT even changed his telephone number."

¶4. Determined not to "undersell" their votes again, for this presidential election Coulibaly and the Medina market women are holding out for bigger fish: a cold storage room. As far as Coulibaly is concerned, only Soumeylou Boubey Maiga is genuinely interested in the plight of Bamako's working poor. She and members of her association scoffed at the thought of voting for National Assembly president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) and chuckled at the idea of IBK paying a visit to fish sellers in Medina. Only Maiga, said Coulibaly, has a history of advocating on behalf of groups like hers and following through on promises to provide essential goods or services like, for instance, cold storage capacity.

¶5. Coulibaly left no doubt that she could deliver the votes of her constituents and their families for Maiga, whom she recently met at a campaign event. "We all vote," she said of

her association members, "and everyone follows me." Coulibaly's deputy, however, sounded a more cautious note. "We haven't decided who we will vote for," she said. "We are waiting to see who will help us. If Soumeylou Boubey Maiga doesn't give us anything, we won't vote for him."

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Comment: Fishing for Votes  
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¶6. Malian elections, like many in Africa, have turned more on personality and regional affiliation than on party platforms, issues, or ideology. It remains to be seen if the positions taken by Coulibaly's association and the fruit vendors (reftel) indicate an encouraging evolution of democracy - or simply an attempt to hold out for a bigger pre-electoral payout. It may, however, have crossed Maiga's mind that running a "populist" campaign could give him an edge. While the Medina fish vendors were hopeful of swapping their presidential votes for a cold storage room, they also hinted that they would likely vote for whomever took the time to visit their market and listen to their concerns. Working vendors may offer a viable campaign base for a populist presidential candidate, and if Boubey Maiga proves to be the only candidate willing to canvas the neighborhoods of Mali's working poor and go after the vote of every day folk - rather than let the voters come to him - he may perform much better than his opponents expect in April 2007.

McCulley